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A CHILD'S JOURNEY WITH DICKENS

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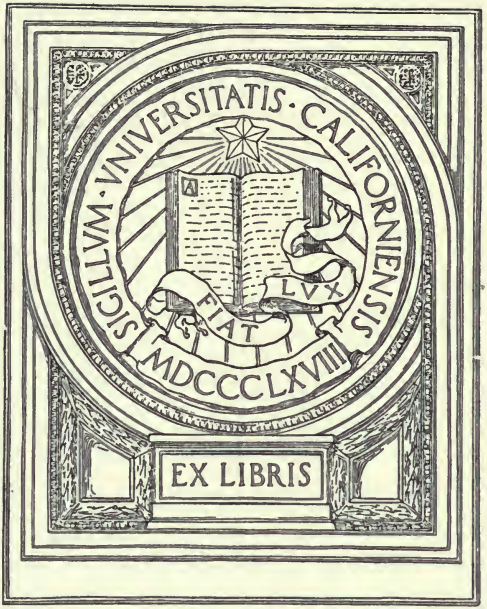
KATE DOUGLAS WIGGIN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A CHILD'S JOURNEY WITH DICKENS

BY

KATE DOUGLAS WIGGIN

DRAFT

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UNIV OF CALIFORNIA

A CHILD'S JOURNEY WITH DICKENS

THE CHILD

UNIV OF
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A CHILD'S JOURNEY WITH DICKENS

WHEN I was a little girl (I always think that these words, in precisely this juxtaposition, are six of the most charming in the language)—when I was a little girl, I lived, between the ages of six and sixteen, in a small village in Maine. My sister and I had few playmates, but I cannot remember that we were ever dull, for dullness in a child, as in a grown person, means lack of dreams and visions, and those we had a-plenty. We were fortunate, too, in that our house was on the brink of one of

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the loveliest rivers in the world. When we clambered down the steep bank to the little cove that was just beneath our bedroom windows, we found ourselves facing a sheet of crystal water as quiet as a lake, a lake from the shores of which we could set any sort of adventure afloat; yet scarcely three hundred feet away was a roaring waterfall, — a baby Niagara, — which, after dashing over the dam in a magnificent tawny torrent, spent itself in a wild stream that made a path between rocky cliffs until it reached the sea, eight miles away. No child could be lonely who lived on the brink of such a river; and then we had, beside our studies and our country sports, our

books, which were the dearest of all our friends. It is a long time ago, but I can see very clearly a certain set of black walnut book-shelves, hanging on the wall of the family sitting-room. There were other cases here and there through the house, but I read and re-read the particular volumes in this one from year to year, and a strange, motley collection they were, to be sure! On the top shelf were George Sand's "Teverino," "Typee," "Undine," Longfellow's and Byron's "Poems," "The Arabian Nights," Bailey's "Festus," "The Lamplighter," "Scottish Chiefs," Thackeray's "Book of Snobs," "Ivanhoe," and the "Life of P. T. Barnum." This last volume, I

may say, did not represent the literary inclinations of my parents, but had been given me on my birthday by a grateful neighbor for saving the life of a valuable Jersey calf tethered on the too steep slopes of our river bank. The "Life of Barnum" was the last book on the heterogeneous top shelf, and on the one next below were most of the novels of Charles Dickens, more eagerly devoured than all the rest, although no book in the case had escaped a second reading save Bailey's "Festus," a little of which went a very long way with us.

It seems to me that no child nowadays has time to love an author as the children and young people of that gen-

eration loved Dickens; nor do I think that any living author of to-day provokes love in exactly the same fashion. From our yellow dog, Pip, to the cat, the canary, the lamb, the cow, down to all the hens and cocks, almost every living thing was named, sooner or later, after one of Dickens's characters; while my favorite sled, painted in brown, with the title in brilliant red letters, was "The Artful Dodger." Why did we do it? We little creatures could n't have suspected that "the democratic movement in literature had come to town," as Richard Whiteing says, nevertheless we responded to it vigorously, ardently, and swelled the hero's public.

For periodical literature we had in our household "Harper's Magazine" and "Littell's Living Age," but we never read newspapers, so that there was a moment of thrilling excitement when my mother, looking up from the "Portland Press," told us that Mr. Dickens was coming to America, and that he was even then sailing from England. I remember distinctly that I prayed for him fervently several times during the next week, that the voyage might be a safe one, and that even the pangs of seasickness might be spared so precious a personage. In due time we heard that he had arrived in New York, and had begun the series of readings from his books; then he came to

Boston, which was still nearer, and then — day of unspeakable excitement! — we learned that he had been prevailed upon to give one reading in Portland, which was only sixteen miles away from our village.

It chanced that my mother was taking me to Charlestown, Massachusetts, to pay a visit to an uncle on the very day after the one appointed for the great event in Portland. She, therefore, planned to take me into town the night before, and to invite the cousin, at whose house we were to sleep, to attend the reading with her. I cannot throw a more brilliant light on the discipline of that period than to say that the subject of my attending the read-

ing was never once mentioned. The price of tickets was supposed to be almost prohibitory. I cannot remember the exact sum; I only know that it was mentioned with bated breath in the village of Hollis, and that there was a general feeling in the community that any one who paid it would have to live down a reputation for riotous extravagance forever afterward. I neither wailed nor wept, nor made any attempt to set aside the parental decrees (which were anything but severe in our family), but if any martyr in Fox's "Book" ever suffered more poignant anguish than I, I am heartily sorry for him; yet my common sense assured me that a child could hardly hope

to be taken on a week's junketing to Charlestown, and expect any other entertainment to be added to it for years to come. The definition of a "pleasure" in the State of Maine, county of York, village of Hollis, year of our Lord 1868, was something that could not reasonably occur too often without being cheapened.

The days, charged with suppressed excitement, flew by. I bade good-bye to my little sister, who was not to share my metropolitan experiences, and my mother and I embarked for Portland on the daily train that dashed hither and thither at the rate of about twelve miles an hour. When the august night and moment arrived, my mother and her

cousin set out for the Place, and the moment they were out of sight I slipped out of the door and followed them, traversing quickly the three or four blocks that separated me from the old City Hall and the Preble House, where Dickens was stopping. I gazed at all the windows and all the entrances of both buildings without beholding any trace of my hero. I watched the throng of happy, excited, lucky people crowding their way into the hall, and went home in a chastened mood to bed,— a bed which, as soon as I got into it, was crowded with Little Nell and the Marchioness, Florence Dombey, Bella Wilfer, Susan Nipper, and Little Em'ly.

There were other dreams, too. Not only had my idol provided me with human friends, to love and laugh and weep over, but he had wrought his genius into *things;* so that, waking or sleeping, every bunch of holly or mistletoe, every plum pudding was alive; every crutch breathed of Tiny Tim; every cricket and every singing, steaming kettle had a soul.

The next morning we started on our railroad journey, which I remember as one being full of excitement from the beginning, for both men and women were discussing the newspapers with extraordinary interest, the day before having been the one on which the President

of the United States had been formally impeached. When the train stopped for two or three minutes at North Berwick, the people on the side of the car next the station suddenly arose and looked eagerly out at some object of apparent interest. I was not, at any age, a person to sit still in her seat when others were looking out of windows, and my small nose was quickly flattened against one of the panes. There on the platform stood the Adored One! His hands were plunged deep in his pockets (a favorite gesture), but presently one was removed to wave away laughingly a piece of the famous Berwick sponge cake, offered him by Mr.

Osgood, of Boston, his travelling companion and friend.

I knew him at once! — the smiling, genial, mobile face, rather highly colored, the brilliant eyes, the watch chain, the red carnation in the button-hole, and the expressive hands, much given to gesture. It was only a momentary view, for the train started, and Dickens vanished, to resume his place in the car next to ours, where he had been, had I known it, ever since we left Portland.

When my mother was again occupied with her book, I slipped away and entered the next car. I took a humble, unoccupied seat near the end, close by the much patronized tank of (unsterilized)

drinking-water, and the train-boy's basket of popcorn balls and molasses candy, and gazed steadily at the famous man, who was chatting busily with Mr. Osgood. I remembered gratefully that my mother had taken the old ribbons off my gray velvet hat and tied me down with blue under the chin, and I thought, if Dickens should happen to rest his eye upon me, that he could hardly fail to be pleased with the effect of the blue ribbon that went under my collar and held a very small squirrel muff in place. Unfortunately, however, his eye never did meet mine, but some family friends espied me, and sent me to ask my mother to come in and sit with them. I brought

her back, and fortunately there was not room enough for me with the party, so I gladly resumed my modest seat by the popcorn boy, where I could watch Dickens, quite unnoticed. There is an Indian myth which relates that when the gaze of the Siva rested for the first time on Tellatonea, the most beautiful of women, his desire to see her was so great that his body became all eyes. Such a transformation, I fear, was perilously near to being my fate! Half an hour passed, perhaps, and one gentleman after another came from here or there to exchange a word of greeting with the famous novelist, so that he was never for a moment alone, thereby inciting in my breast my

first, and about my last, experience of the passion of jealousy. Suddenly, however, Mr. Osgood arose, and with an apology went into the smoking-car. I never knew how it happened; I had no plan, no preparation, no intention, no provocation; but invisible ropes pulled me out of my seat, and, speeding up the aisle, I planted myself timorously down, an unbidden guest, in the seat of honor. I had a moment to recover my equanimity, for Dickens was looking out of the window, but he turned in a moment, and said with justifiable surprise: —

"God bless my soul, where did you come from?"

"I came from Hollis, Maine," I stam-

mered, "and I 'm going to Charlestown to visit my uncle. My mother and her cousin went to your reading last night, but, of course, three could n't go from the same family, so I stayed at home. Nora, that 's my little sister, stayed at home too. She 's too small to go on a journey, but she wanted to go to the reading dreadfully. There was a lady there who had never heard of Betsey Trotwood, and had only read two of your books!"

"Well, upon my word!" he said; "you do not mean to say that *you* have read them!"

"Of course I have," I replied; "every one of them but the two that we are

going to buy in Boston, and some of them six times."

"Bless my soul!" he ejaculated again. "Those long thick books, and you such a slip of a thing."

"Of course," I explained conscientiously, "I do skip some of the very dull parts once in a while; not the short dull parts, but the long ones."

He laughed heartily. "Now, that is something that I hear very little about," he said. "I distinctly want to learn more about those very dull parts." And whether to amuse himself, or to amuse me, I do not know, he took out a notebook and pencil from his pocket and proceeded to give me an exhausting and

exhaustive examination on this subject; the books in which the dull parts predominated; and the characters and subjects which principally produced them. He chuckled so constantly during this operation that I could hardly help believing myself extraordinarily agreeable, so I continued dealing these infant blows, under the delusion that I was flinging him bouquets.

It was not long before one of my hands was in his, and his arm around my waist, while we talked of many things. They say, I believe, that his hands were "undistinguished" in shape, and that he wore too many rings. Well, those criticisms must come from persons

who never felt the warmth of his hand-clasp! For my part, I am glad that Pullman chair cars had not come into fashion, else I should never have experienced the delicious joy of snuggling up to Genius, and of being distinctly encouraged in the attitude.

I wish I could recall still more of his conversation, but I was too happy, too exhilarated, and too inexperienced to take conscious notes of the interview. I remember feeling that I had never known anybody so well and so intimately, and that I talked with him as one talks under cover of darkness or before the flickering light of a fire. It seems to me, as I look back now, and remember how the little

soul of me came out and sat in the sunshine of his presence, that I must have had some premonition that the child, who would come to be one of the least of writers, was then talking with one of the greatest;—talking, too, of the author's profession and high calling. All the little details of the meeting stand out as clearly as though it had happened yesterday. I can see every article of his clothing and of my own; the other passengers in the car; the landscape through the window, and above all the face of Dickens, deeply lined, with sparkling eyes and an amused, waggish smile that curled the corners of his mouth under his grizzled moustache. A part of our conversation was given to

a Boston newspaper next day, by the author himself, or by Mr. Osgood, and a little more was added a few years after by an old lady who sat in the next seat to us. (The pronoun "us" seems ridiculously intimate, but I have no doubt I used it, quite unabashed, at that date.)

"What book of mine do you like best?" Dickens asked, I remember; and I answered, "Oh, I like David Copperfield much the best. That is the one I have read six times."

"Six times, — good, good!" he replied; "I am glad that you like Davy, so do I; — I like it best, too!" clapping his hands; and that was the only remark he made which attracted the attention

of the other passengers, who looked in our direction now and then, I have been told, smiling at the interview, but preserving its privacy with the utmost friendliness.

"Of course," I added, "I almost said 'Great Expectations,' because that comes next. We named our little yellow dog Mr. Pip. They told father he was part rat terrier, and we were all so pleased. Then one day father showed him a trap with a mouse in it. The mouse wiggled its tail just a little, and Pip was so frightened that he ran under the barn and stayed the rest of the day. Then all the neighbors made fun of him, and you can think how Nora and I love him when

he 's had such a hard time, just like Pip in 'Great Expectations'!"

Here again my new friend's mirth was delightful to behold, so much so that my embarrassed mother, who had been watching me for half an hour, almost made up her mind to drag me away before the very eyes of our fellow passengers. I had never been thought an amusing child in the family circle; what then, could I be saying to the most distinguished and popular author in the universe?

"We have another dog," I went on, "and his name is Mr. Pocket. We were playing with Pip, who is a smooth dog, one day, when a shaggy dog came along

that did n't belong to anybody, and had n't any home. He liked Pip and Pip liked him, so we kept him, and named him Pocket after Pip's friend. The real Mr. Pip and Mr. Pocket met first in Miss Havisham's garden, and they had such a funny fight it always makes father laugh till he can't read! Then they became great friends. Perhaps you remember Mr. Pip and Mr. Pocket?" And Dickens thought he did, which, perhaps, is not strange, considering that he was the author of their respective beings. Mr. Harry Furniss declares that "Great Expectations" was Dickens's favorite novel, but I can only say that to me he avowed his special fondness for "David Copperfield."

"Did you want to go to my reading very much?" was another question. Here was a subject that had never once been touched upon in all the past days, — a topic that stirred the very depths of my disappointment and sorrow, fairly choking me, and making my lip tremble by its unexpectedness, as I faltered, "*Yes; more than tongue can tell.*"

I looked up a second later, when I was sure that the tears in my eyes were not going to fall, and to my astonishment saw that Dickens's eyes were in precisely the same state of moisture. That was a never-to-be-forgotten moment, although I was too young to appreciate the full significance of it.

"Do you cry when you read out loud?" I asked curiously. "We all do in our family. And we never read about Tiny Tim, or about Steerforth when his body is washed up on the beach, on Saturday nights, or our eyes are too swollen to go to Sunday School."

"Yes, I cry when I read about Steerforth," he answered quietly, and I felt no astonishment.

"We cry the worst when it says, 'All the men who carried him had known him and gone sailing with him, and seen him merry and bold,'" I said, growing very tearful in reminiscence.

We were now fast approaching our destination, — the station in Boston, —

and the passengers began to collect their wraps and bundles. Mr. Osgood had two or three times made his appearance, but had been waved away with a smile by Dickens, — a smile that seemed to say, — "You will excuse me, I know, but this child has the right of way."

"You are not travelling alone?" he asked, as he arose to put on his overcoat.

"Oh, no," I answered, coming down to earth for the first time since I had taken my seat beside him, — "oh, no, I had a mother, but I forgot all about her." Whereupon he said, — "You are a passed-mistress of the art of flattery!" But this remark was told me years afterwards by the old lady who was sitting

in the next seat, and who overheard as much of the conversation as she possibly could, so she informed me.

Dickens took me back to the forgotten mother, and introduced himself, and I, still clinging to his hand, left the car and walked with him down the platform until he disappeared in the carriage with Mr. Osgood, leaving me with the feeling that I must continue my existence somehow in a dull and dreary world.

That was my last glimpse of him, but pictures made in childhood are painted in bright hues, and this one has never faded. The child of to-day would hardly be able to establish so instantaneous a friendship. She would have heard of

celebrity hunters and autograph collectors and be self-conscious, while I followed the dictates of my countrified little heart, and scraped acquaintance confidently with the magician who had glorified my childhood by his art.

He had his literary weaknesses, Charles Dickens, but they were all dear, big, attractive ones, virtues grown a bit wild and rank. Somehow when you put him — with his elemental humor, his inexhaustible vitality, his humanity, sympathy, and pity — beside the Impeccables, he always looms large! Just for a moment, when the heart overpowers the reason, he even makes the flawless ones look a little faded and colorless!

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